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ABSTRACT

The Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS) is a consortium of public school districts in Mississippi working with the Bureau of Educational Research and Evaluation in the College of Education at Mississippi State University. PREPS is designed to provide data to local decision makers and aid them in problem identification. The superintendents of member school districts make up the PREPS Advisory Council. The council selects one overall research project each year believed to have the greatest impact for member districts. Each district selects one project believed to be most useful in providing data needed for making decisions within the district. PREPS staff members aid in design of the study, the data collection process, and statistical analyses. The education function is directed toward promoting delivery of good data that are useful in the decision making process. The success of the PREPS concept is dependent upon certain basics: PREPS exists to serve school districts; an interactional relationship permitting communication between PREPS staff and local decision makers is functional; a local school district commitment in terms of money and personnel is necessary; and a task force approach is used for problem solving. PREPS provides a viable model to make quality data available. (DWH)

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EDUCATIONAL SERVICES FOR RESTRUCTURING LOCAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS: PREPS AS AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

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Introduction

During the days of the baby boom, nothing was too good for our public schools. There was increased funding for elementary and secondary education and federal funds of all descriptions for teacher education programs. There was always a need for more teachers. Research was usually something done on federal money and evaluation was given legitimate status by federal programs which first required evaluation.

Then the baby boom graduated and didn't immediately have children. All of a sudden the public wanted efficiency for their tax dollar and schools were not the exception to the rule any more. When dollars were cut from the federal budget, one area hurt the most was research and evaluation.

While the following model may not seem pleasing to those interested in basic research or those researchers who prefer becoming a specialist in one limited area, it does offer a way for teacher education institutions to begin to develop a research emphasis. The unique part of the proposal is that the direct beneficiaries are the public schools.

For years higher education has been willing to train current faculty members in new methods. Higher education has also been willing to develop and implement new systems for public schools. However, there have been few situations where public schools (LEA's) and higher education have cooperated as equal partners in a consortium.

In addition, while higher education has often led the way in calling for change, they have a poor record in implementing change. One key to this failure is that the faculty and administration of local schools are rarely involved as critical partners in the change

process. Often local school officials feel they are told, ordered, and directed in a program and not involved. Any review of the long standing research on defusion of innovations reveals that local involvement and leadership are a key.

If one believes in the research and evaluation process, it should work in the local schools just as it works on cosmic national issues. The idea is to ask critical questions and then gather valid data to examine the questions. The weakness in most public schools is a lack of personnel trained in research and evaluation methodology. By aiding local officials in obtaining good data for the decision making process, higher education can play a new role in helping schools bring about change.

The Philosophy of PREPS

The Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS) is one method of providing good data to local decision makers. PREPS is a consortium of 31 public school districts in Mississippi working in cooperation with the Bureau of Educational Research and Evaluation in the College of Education at Mississippi State University. PREPS is designed to address the data needs of the local decision makers. However, this consortium is not federally funded; its primary concern is not inservice education; and it has steadily grown during the eight years of its existence. PREPS is a service concept in education which calls on problem-solving and task-force approaches in addressing an issue.

Johnny Carson, in one of his comedy routines, is noted for giving answers before he sees the question. In education, many of our efforts in working with public schools could best be described as answers

seeking a question. PREPS seeks to alter this pattern by aiding school districts in identifying and describing their own problems and then bringing to the identified problems the technical expertise which can lead to a satisfactory solution. However, the PREPS role in the resolution of the problem is that of providing quality data which can be utilized by superintendents in the local decision-making process and is not that of making decisions for schools.

Although the idea of finding one person who possesses all the technical expertise to direct such an effort is a noble idea, a task-force approach is more likely to be appropriate. Therefore, although one person must assume responsibility for every activity in PREPS, the staff has been organized in such a manner that each staff member has a unique contribution which can be focused on the problem-solving process. By utilizing a task-force approach, PREPS tends to place maximum emphasis on the quality of the resultant data as opposed to the quality of any single individual's efforts.

To those who are familiar with the growth of land grant universities in America and the associated development of cooperative extension services, the model described above should be clear. The cooperative extension service follows the problem-solving approach in addressing an issue and uses the methodology of a task force to assure that the best possible data are provided to the agricultural decision maker, i.e., the farmer. PREPS is an attempt to take a portion of this most successful model and apply it to the educational community.

The Organization and Function of PREPS

When Mississippi passed an accountability law in 1974, the state's superintendents began to realize the need for good data to aid in the

decision-making process concerning the many programs within their districts. As is common for many administrators, they had allowed themselves to become so involved with answering bureaucratic reports and putting out brush fires that the processes of planning and decision making had to take a back seat. However, because of the realization that decisions would soon need good data to develop such a service, PREPS was created. Mississippi State University, with a commitment to service as a land grant institution, became the home of the consortium at the request of the superintendents. The active leadership of the local superintendents is the force which has caused PREPS to grow from ten schools the first year to 31 schools in its eighth and current year of operation. These superintendents form an advisory board which not only aids in directing the actions of PREPS, but also serves to advise the Dean of the College of Education on current issues in the public schools and in education in general.

School districts become members of PREPS by paying a membership fee each year which entitles them to a common set of services. It is also possible for a member school to purchase additional services from a standard fee schedule. Each school then appoints one person within its district to serve as the coordinator for the local program. This person is responsible for conducting all activities associated with PREPS for that district.

The common set of services alluded to earlier generally falls into three categories. First, each year the PREPS Advisory Council selects one overall research project which they feel will have the greatest impact for all the member districts. Each district then cooperates in providing either subjects or data which are utilized in the research project. The second area, and the most important one according to the

member superintendents, is the local project. Each district selects one project that should be the most useful in providing the data needed for making decisions within the district. Once the problem is identified, PREPS staff members aid in the design of the study, the data collection process, the statistical analyses (if necessary), and any other procedures which are relevant. Local staff are trained to carry out much of the clerical work, thus reducing the external cost to the district. In addition, on-site visits by the PREPS staff can be scheduled each year to monitor the progress of the local project and to provide assistance when necessary. Each member district is also provided access to a toll-free telephone line on which they can call at any time to discuss any questions they may have.

Finally, PREPS has an education function which is directed toward promoting the delivery of good data to be used in the decision-making process. Each summer each district presents its designated local project in a "Research Sharing Conference." Much to the delight of the PREPS staff, this conference has become the highlight of the year as public school officials have the opportunity to share their problems and their plans for solving these problems based on the data provided through their local projects. A second effort under the education function is the "Mississippi Conference on Testing and Evaluation," which is cosponsored by PREPS and the Mississippi Department of Education. During this conference, educators in the state can get together to share their ideas on testing and evaluation. Many of the presenters are professionals from the PREPS school districts. A third effort is the "Computers in Education Conference," which is designed to help member districts share ideas as on how to address the microcomputer revolution in education. PREPS plays a role in the

evaluation of microcomputer software as one of 25 national sites which are members of MicroSIFT. Results of these evaluations are fed into a system which is called "Resources In Computer Education" (RICE), which is funded by NIE and is directed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

During the 1979-80 academic year, the superintendents felt some training in test construction would be beneficial. Therefore, each district choosing to participate in this special training sent from two to six teachers in a limited discipline area to a week-long training program. During the training, some basic principles of test construction were taught along with a procedure for developing a test. During the following year, each team developed and field-tested an evaluative instrument in a chosen area. This process provided the team with the skills and confidence to pursue other test construction activities within its district. However, due to the pressing need for good student evaluations in all academic areas, during the 1983-84 academic year, the superintendents voted to dedicate a two- to three-year period of time to construct a criterion-referenced test item bank as the sole project of the consortium. Therefore, 186 teachers, all trained in test development skills, are working diligently to create a resource which will be shared among all the members districts. By approaching the task in this diversified manner, the task required by any one district has been limited. Once this task is completed, PREPS will move on to new areas of interest while remaining true to the general assignment to provide data to assist decision makers.

Results from PREPS

The various PREPS projects of the past eight years have covered a wide range of topics. The first overall project conducted by PREPS was

to determine the relationship between various background factors and basic skills achievement test scores in Mississippi. The results indicated that 75% of the variance in fifth grade reading scores among schools could be explained by the socio-economic level of the parents in the school's service area. This one finding led Mississippi to change its State Assessment Program from one which looked simply at raw achievement to one which considered expected performance. PREPS has also studied the effectiveness of a reading aide program, which later became part of the Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982 in an attempt to bolster reading achievement in the primary grades. Studies have also looked at the impact of dropouts on the economy and have investigated how school district organization relates to student achievement in those schools.

The local projects have also been effective. Several districts have used PREPS either to conduct follow-up studies of graduates or to collect attitudinal data from the community as a vital link in the planning process. Other districts have found themselves faced with a decision to eliminate duplicate programs and have used PREPS to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs to provide data which are used in the final decision process. One school used a longitudinal study of achievement by schools within the district to terminate a law suit which alleged that children in one school were being given an inferior program. Finally, PREPS has also aided school districts by providing the evaluation of such federal programs as the Chapter I remedial programs. Criterion-referenced tests developed by member districts have revealed where problems exist in their instructional programs and have provided an opportunity for them to begin serious revisions and planning for the future. The decision about the local project belongs to the

local school district. Although all the local projects may not have provided a study worthy of printing in a national journal, most of the local projects are found at the heart of the decision-making process in the local district. The experience of PREPS tends to support the idea that local decision makers will use good data in making a decision if the data are made available to them in a form they can use. Providing results which address the local needs is probably one of the most important attributes of PREPS. The latest decision to develop a test item bank is again focused toward helping the local districts obtain better data to impact on decisions.

The Keys to Success

The PREPS concept has been successful for Mississippi public schools and for Mississippi State University. Several other institutions are considering implementation of PREPS-type organizations. To assure success of the PREPS concept, there are a few simple, but crucial, points which must be remembered.

First and foremost, PREPS exists to serve the school districts, not to force some external ideas on the school. When a PREPS staff member enters a school district, that person assumes the role of an assistant superintendent for research and evaluation with the primary goal being that of acquisition of good data to aid in the decision-making process. By assuming the role of an assistant superintendent within the local school district, the PREPS staff member joins the school's administrative team in a supportive role with the local district's needs as the paramount concern.

Second, there must be an ongoing, interactional relationship in which the PREPS staff and the local decision makers can communicate.

This relationship must always manifest that the local school is in charge of making decisions, but PREPS wishes to be consistently involved with the local school district in that process. By establishing and fostering the primary contact within the district with the superintendent, the communication problems are minimized. The best way to consider PREPS relationship to the schools is that the organization is constantly on call to its members to address whatever the local administration feels is important.

Third, there must be a local district commitment in terms of money and personnel. Although many would feel that federal funding would make the program run more smoothly, this fact is not supported by the action of the members. The districts which join PREPS place their own money into the program and have an expectation for the results of the program. Therefore, the districts are willing to participate and cooperate in the fashion which will lead to a successful program. If local funds are provided from the district to purchase such services, continued support of the program is obviously based on the satisfaction of the districts that use these services.

Fourth, the PREPS organization uses a task-force approach on each problem. If one person is allowed to carry the entire weight of the program, then too many opportunities for failure would exist. No one person can adequately respond to all situations. By using a task force of several persons with the program, the quality of the results is enhanced. One should understand the difference between assigning one staff member the administrative responsibility for a project and having one staff member totally conduct the project.

The Potential of Other Programs

Now that the success of PREPS in Mississippi has been discussed, other school districts and universities may wonder if such a venture would be profitable for them.

To the school districts, the answer is rather simple. If a district cannot afford its own research and evaluation unit, but needs data to aid in the decision-making process, the PREPS approach is the most efficient and effective alternative. Such an ongoing relationship with other school districts can provide a strong foundation for change.

To the universities, the answer is also relatively simple, but it has more parts. First, the university has a commitment to service. Unfortunately, most universities have overlooked the potential of providing research and evaluation services to schools. Therefore, where these services have been provided, they have largely been uncoordinated and have been directed at the concerns of a particular faculty member. Second, most universities are seeking to stimulate new research activities among their faculties. What more fertile field could exist for arousing interest in research than addressing the pressing needs of the public schools? It is understood that education is in deep need for some sound basic research into the theories which serve as the foundations for our educational practices. However, until a researcher can first understand the true situation which exists in our educational system, it will be difficult to identify which concerns should be classified as basic. By working in a program such as PREPS, one can acquire this necessary experience. Third, as the staff from the university meets public school officials in a service role, valuable input can be gained for making the teacher education programs more effective. If universities are to take their teacher training

commitment seriously, one key factor must be feedback on an ongoing basis from the consumers of their products -- the schools. Fourth, the student enrollment is dropping and higher education is faced with no growth, at least -- if not an actual decline in staff. A PREPS-type organization allows a university to acquire new financial resources which can aid in maintaining and developing a strong faculty by assigning a portion of a faculty member's time to the PREPS operation.

Conclusion

The past few years have seen dramatic changes in the structure of research and evaluation organizations. It is apparent that the current era will require the research and evaluation administrators to prove they can add value to the operation of a school. The most obvious way to prove this value is to see that quality data are available to key decision makers as it is needed.

PREPS offers a viable model which has eight years of experience to its credit. As the PREPS system focuses on good data for local decision makers, it is also able to address the larger needs which arise among schools. The greatest potential of a PREPS consortium is to serve as the catalyst for change in the schools.

In summary, PREPS may be rediscovering what agriculture discovered at the turn of the century. It does us little good to know something or be capable of accomplishing something, if we never get to the point of taking action. Maybe education is ready to develop an educational extension service whose primary goal is to implement sound change in the local schools.